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ABSTRACT

For her sabbatical a professor of teacher education at Emporia State University returned to the elementary classroom after a 20-year absence to teach in a third/fourth combination classroom in the Emporia, Kansas Public Schools. The return to elementary classroom teaching provided the professor with the opportunity to utilize some of the social studies strategies she shared with her classroom management, social studies methods, and curriculum students at the university. These strategies included: building classroom community and promoting student ownership; focusing on a daily historical or current event; encouraging critical thinking and problem solving; planning for instruction using the multiple intelligences identified by Howard Gardner; and improving student understanding of geography. The elementary classroom the professor taught in, rich in cultural and economic diversity, consisted of 22 students, 10 third graders, and 12 fourth graders. A group building activity, "Getting To Know You," promoted student ownership of the classroom, while a daily "Parrot Puzzle" focused on different thinking skills and different areas of the curriculum. To make the best use of the limited time available in the classroom, teachers need to build community and ownership, integrate learning so connections are clear to students, and teach for the diverse learning needs of students. (Contains a resource list.) (BT)

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Lessons Learned from a Multiculturally, Economically Diverse Classroom Setting

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During the 1998-99 school year, I took a year-long sabbatical from my position as Professor in the Division of Early Childhood/Elementary Teacher Education at Emporia State University to return to the elementary classroom as a teacher in a third/fourth combination classroom at William Allen White Elementary School in the Emporia, KS Public Schools. I had last taught in an elementary classroom on a full-time basis during the 1978-79 school year. The return to elementary classroom teaching provided me with an opportunity to utilize some of the social studies strategies I share with my classroom management, social studies methods, and curriculum students at the University. These strategies included:

--Building classroom community and promoting student ownership

--Focusing on a daily historical or current event

--Encouraging critical thinking and problem solving

--Planning for instruction using the multiple intelligences identified by Dr. Howard Gardner[1]

--Improving student understanding of geography

Building Classroom Community and Promoting Student Ownership

During my sabbatical, I was fortunate to teach in a classroom rich in cultural and economic diversity. My class of twenty-two students included:

--ten third graders and twelve fourth graders

--nine students for whom English was not their first language

--eleven students from single-parent homes

--eight students receiving from special education or other support services

--sixteen children receiving free and reduced lunches

Building a classroom community and promoting student ownership of the classroom by such diverse learners provided challenges throughout the year.

To build classroom community, students participated in structured group building activities often as part of the classroom routine, particularly during the first week of class. Such group building activities are designed to help students experience success while cooperating with other students. By observing student interaction during group building activities, the teacher has the opportunity to assess the students' social skills and communication skills.[2]

Group Building Activity Example

"Getting to Know You"[3]

Students work in pairs assigned by the teacher to learn about other students. Information from the class is used to construct a series of graphs. Students are paired by the teacher. To facilitate interaction between many different students, pairs can be reassigned for each item.

1. Students stand if their partner has a brother.
2. Students stand if their partner has a sister.

A class graph can be constructed showing how many students have sisters, how many have brothers, and how many have both brothers and sisters.[4]

3. Students stand if their partner has a dog.
4. Students stand if their partner has a cat.
5. Students stand if their partner has a pet other than a dog or cat.

A class graph can be constructed showing how many students have dogs, cats, or other pets.

Promoting student ownership of the classroom is an on-going process. A classroom environment in which students are encouraged to take responsibility for the success of other students as well as themselves promotes improved attitudes toward learning, school, teachers, and peers.[5] To

make sure each student was a part of the classroom, a group bulletin board was created with space for every student to display items of importance to them. These items included pictures of friends and family, artwork created by the student, products from the classroom they were proud of, and even letters written to students. Students were encouraged to change the items in their space frequently.

Frequent class meetings also helped to promote ownership of the classroom. During the class meeting, students first complimented students who had helped them. Students were encouraged to provide specific, rather than general, feedback when giving a compliment. Classroom meetings also provided an opportunity to discuss group problems and concerns, celebrate group successes, and plan for class activities.[6]

Shared projects provided another opportunity for student ownership and involvement. During the fall semester, the class operated a business in which they were responsible for pop sales to faculty and staff in the school. Student representatives negotiated with the principal for the business, accounting procedures, and profit distribution. Students voted on a name for the business and surveyed staff to determine what flavors of pop were the most popular. Students also counted the change from pop sales, taking turns in pairs on a daily basis. The calculation of cost, income, and profit provided opportunities to practice math skills.

Focusing on a Daily Historical or Current Event

To help students feel that every day is a special day in school, a daily event from history or current events was discussed. Daily oral language practice involved copying a brief summary about the event from the board while proofreading for capitalization, misspelling, and punctuation. An atlas activity frequently asked students to locate places related to the event in their individual atlases which were provided for each student. The event was discussed during a specific time each day with

a related activity from different multiple intelligence areas.

For example, the daily event for November 20 focused on the birthday of Robert F. Kennedy. Students located places related to the life of Robert Kennedy which included: Massachusetts (state of his birth), Washington, D. C. (where he served as Attorney General and Senator), New York (where he was elected United States Senator) and California (where he was killed). Students then listened to the song "Abraham, Martin, and John" and identified the people in the song.[7]

The event for each day was determined by using a variety of print and electronic resources (see list at end of this paper). The daily event also provided an opportunity for students to look for information about the daily event, particularly pictures, using the Internet with assistance from the teacher. Pairs of students could be assigned an event to look for on a rotating basis so all had a chance to participate.

Encouraging Critical Thinking and Problem Solving

Critical thinking and problem solving are important skills all students need. These skills are also targeted by the accreditation program for Kansas schools, Quality Performance Accreditation (QPA).[8] Clearly, critical thinking and problem solving must be infused in all learning activities. In addition to providing such opportunities whenever possible during instruction, a daily "Parrot Puzzle" challenged students to be critical thinkers and problem solvers.

A Parrot Puzzle was posted at the beginning of the day. They were named for the colorful parrot who occupied one of the bulletin boards in the classroom. Parrot Puzzles focused on different thinking skills and different areas of the curriculum. They were often related to events of the day. An example of a Parrot Puzzle related to a current event would be:

> Disney plans to build its newest theme park on an island that is south of China, southwest of Taiwan, northwest of the Phillippines, east of Vietnam, and north of Indonesia. The island has a two word name. The words in the name rhyme with each other. Name the island.

Students would be encouraged to use their atlases to find the answer. Correct answers received a sticker by the student's name on the Parrot Puzzle chart.

Planning for Instruction Using the Multiple Intelligences

Planning to accommodate different student intelligences areas was a goal during my sabbatical. An example of planning with multiple intelligences was the careers unit. After a presentation on multiple intelligences, presentations from members of the community were structured over several weeks on each of the intelligence areas. These included:

Verbal Intelligence	Professor who had published several books
Math Intelligence	Math education professor
Visual Intelligence	Art teacher
Musical Intelligence	Teachers College Dean played guitar and sang with students
Body Intelligence	Students had pen pals from P. E. class at University
People Intelligence	Political science professor
Self Intelligence	Community member who had taken mission trips to South America
Nature Intelligence	University science student who helped students chart moon phases

Each presenter was requested to involve students in one or more activities and to discuss career possibilities in the area they were speaking about. When all the presentations had concluded, students were asked to analyze their own intelligence preferences and think about a career related to their intelligence preference they might like to pursue. Student choices were displayed on a bulletin board.

Improving Student Understanding of Geography

Map reading is a life skill important to all students. In addition to linking historical and current events for each day to locations whenever possible, students also utilized map kits to promote

interest and hand-on use of maps[9]. Using a map kit for Kansas, for example, students were asked to locate:

--places in Kansas with boys' first names (Examples: Howard, Douglas, Franklin)

--places in Kansas with girls' first names (Examples: Mildred, Amy, Sharon Springs)

--places in Kansas with an animal or bird's name (Examples: Buffalo, Bird City, Wolf Creek)

--places in Kansas with colors in their name (Examples: White City, Greensburg, Brown)

--places in Kansas with a tree or plant in their name (Examples: Elmdale, Cottonwood Falls, Oakley)

--places in Kansas with the word "city" in their name (Examples: (Kansas City, Junction City, Arkansas City)

Map kit activities provided opportunities for cooperative learning with real life materials. Maps provided by the Kansas State Department of Transportation were used in the map activity, and students were given the map to keep when the activity was concluded.

Conclusion

The sabbatical experience provided me with the opportunity to reconnect to elementary school teaching on a daily basis. One of the major challenges facing teachers today is how to get everything done. Time management is essential in the contemporary classroom. To make the best use of the limited time available in the classroom, teachers need to build community and ownership, integrate learning so connections are clear to students, promote critical thinking and problem solving, and teach for the diverse learning needs of students.

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